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SUBJECT: MAGDALEN ISLANDS SEAL HUNT CONTROVERSY CONTINUES

1. Summary: CG visited the ice floes off the coast of the Magdalen Islands March 10 to observe the harp seal population on its annual migration from Greenland. As many as 350,000 young seals may be culled in the hunt this year, although this year's higher quota may well not be reached. Opponents of the hunt decry it for being cruel and unsustainable. Federal and provincial authorities, fully aware of the public relations problem surrounding the hunt, defend its conduct and claim it is the most strictly controlled and supervised hunt in the world. They are investigating alternative methods of killing the seal other than with clubs and rifles that can leave seals wounded. Harp seals number over 5 million, three times what they were in the 1970s. Despite the ban of seal products in the U.S. and Europe, the industry earned about \$15 million last year, primarily from pelt sales to Norway, Denmark and China. End Summary.

2. The commercial hunt for harp seals off the Magdalen Islands, in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, began March 24 - by no coincidence the same day as a campaign against the hunt by the international animal welfare movement. Madelinots who live on the archipelago, and for whom the seal hunt is a way of life and source of income, have equally strong sentiments in favor of the hunt.

3. The ice field where the Greenland harp seals breed and whelp, situated an hour's helicopter ride from the "Maggies," is the only place in the world where it is possible to land and observe the seals before the hunt or to monitor sealing activity. (Note: the Atlantic off Newfoundland, where the majority of the harp seal population congregate, is too rough to permit observation). Around 200 people visited the fragile ice floe during the first half of March this year, prior to the start of the hunt that goes into May, when the sea ice breaks up. CG traveled onto the ice via helicopter March 10 to observe the hundreds of thousands of seals that travel 2,000 miles from the Arctic to give birth and mate before returning to Greenland. Madelinot sealers, temporarily acting as ecotourist guides, were there to explain the hunt and the lifecycle of the seal. A mass of seals and their white-coated pups were visible on the ice floe. As many as 350,000 young harp seals may not make the return voyage.

4. This year the Gulf of St Lawrence is 40 percent covered with ice - some years it is 80 percent. Storms have moved the ice field against the Prince Edward Island coast. The strength of the sea ice depends on rain that refreezes and makes it more solid. If the ice is too thin, seal pups, lacking enough blubber, fall off the ice floes and can drown. There were reports of mass drownings last year. Six of the last nine winters have been unusually mild. This year, the ice is light but quite solid.

5. An exhaustive census in 1999 counted 5.2 million Greenland/harp seals, up from 2 million in the 1970's. In 1983, the Canadian government banned the killing of newborn "whitecoat" seal pups that are still being nursed by their mothers. It is still permitted to kill young seals that have molted, becoming grey at around two weeks of age, and have gone from 24 to 80 lbs. Hunters do kill adult seals, but reports from the Canadian government show that the vast majority of seals killed in the hunt are "beaters" - young seals from 12 days to 12 months old, that thrash the water as they swim. In the 2002-2003 hunt, 96.6 percent were beaters under 3 months of age. The number of seals killed last year was reported to be 286,238 - more than at any other time in the past 35 years. The new quota announced in 2003 would allow 975,000 harp seals to be 'harvested' over 3 years, through 2005.

6. The actual hunt is not open to outside observers (it is pretty bloody and gruesome to watch), except for Federal and provincial inspectors in boats. Non-governmental opponents arrive unannounced on the ice or from the air; they submit video evidence of probable violations to Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans, but they claim no charges have been placed to date. Protesters have been trying to stop the seal hunt since 1969, leading to a ban by the EEC on all import of harp seal products and to the U.S. Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). Opponents denounce the hunt as cruel and unsustainable. Because of its remoteness, in areas with little oversight, they claim the hunt continues to break the rules while sanitizing the activity with phrases such as "Seal fishery" and "harvest." Anti-sealers accuse hunters of skinning conscious seals (over 40 percent of the time), dragging live seals across the ice with hooks, and shooting and wounding seals.

17. While I was not able to witness the hunt first hand, I spoke to a number of hunters and federal fisheries officials who monitor the hunt, and to local environmental activists. Their views were not widely differing – the seal hunt is accepted as a part of life on the islands. The seal museum presents both sides of the debate, however; all my local interlocutors clearly knew they have a tremendous public relations problem with the hunt. Local inspectors with whom I spoke insisted the hunt is subject to strict controls and is well supervised.

18. Roger Simon, Area Director of Fisheries and Oceans Canada, who has been inspecting the hunt for over 20 years, flatly denied charges of cruelty. He said sealers are required by law to perform a simple blink reflex test to determine if the seal is dead before skinning it. He acknowledged that as in other creatures, there are some involuntary muscle spasms after death that could explain movement. We discussed alternative methods of killing the seals humanely, including ballistics and lethal injections. Simon said that a shot against the head, as in an abattoir, would not be a good alternative because the thin cranium of the young seal would allow a bullet passed through, merely wounding. He asserted that the only sure way to kill a seal was the traditional method of a well-aimed blow to the front of the skull.

19. In refuting the charge of hunters skinning seals while still conscious, Simon claimed that if a hunter tried to skin a moving animal, he would damage and destroy the value of the pelt. He conceded that there is still some muscle reflex observable in dead seals. Simon said only a certain caliber of ammunition is authorized to promote a clean kill, but he acknowledged there is some degree of wounding. Tests are going on with veterinarians who work in abattoirs to find more acceptable methods.

10. All of those close to the resource with whom I spoke insisted that the hunt is conducted in a clean and professional manner; they underscore it is the most closely monitored hunt in the world. They note that the seals coming to whelp from Greenland are growing in number, to the point that they are threatening the fish stocks. The federal government controls the seals while they are in the water; the provincial government controls them once they are dead. Under provincial law, the complete and precise use of every seal killed must be accounted for. Hunters must be licensed. Before getting a permit, commercial sealers must do 20 hours training and must work under a professional sealer for two years.

11. Donald Leblanc, who has spent all his life sealing and currently is the main trainer on humane techniques of killing, bleeding and skinning seals for people seeking permits, described the strict standards of the 20-hour course, including mandatory classes by veterinarians, pelt classers, and academics. Leblanc admitted there were some bad practices but said these were the exception and not condoned. Most hunters know the habits and respect the marine mammals, he said.

12. Forty years ago, people on the Islands ate seals to survive, but the context has now changed. Both Simon and Leblanc told CG that quality has become essential: The collection of seal pelts "is more artisanal than industrial." The commercial seal hunt is for pelts and oil. Pelts are worth from C\$40-70 if they are perfect, and include the tail. The seal's blubber, attached to the pelt, yields 40 lbs of oil that can produce 500 anti-cholesterol health capsules (Omega 3). There is not much market for the meat. Most seal carcasses are left on the ice where they are consumed by gulls, fish and sea lice. The industry earned about \$15 million last year, primarily from pelt sales to Norway, Denmark and China.

13. Regarding sustainability, anti-sealers point out marine mammals have proved vulnerable in the past. Walrus herds used to be abundant off the Islands: British navigator Peter Haldimand noted in his diary in 1765 that about 100,000 walruses could be seen along the shores of Grande Entree Island. Abusive commercial slaughter meant that by 1799, the walrus had completely disappeared from the Islands. Madelinots point out that harp seals are the second most abundant seal in the world, however. Hunters say that the adult seal eats around 5 pounds of fish a day, taking a bite of the best part and leaving the rest. It is clear that for the Madelinots, keeping the seal population in check is an advantage to the annual hunt.

14. The GOC is clearly aware of the impact of the hunt on fish stocks, especially cod. Federal inspector Simon told CG that the Canadian Government has responded to the controversy on killing young harp seals not by prohibiting the traditional hunt but by implementing strategies for the long-term management of the seal population. For today's hunter on the Magdalen Islands, the seal hunt is an important part of making a living following the 1990 moratorium on cod fishing and the drop of fish stocks (e.g. 85 percent drop in ocean perch stocks). The complete moratorium on cod fishing last year means that lobster fishing has become one of the Islands' main resources (5 million pounds), as well as snow crabs, eels, mackerel and herrings. These catches do not compare to the \$15,000 a sealer can make during the few weeks of the spring hunt. The islanders were quick to assure CG they were not getting rich through sealing,

however, and they point out that the quotas are rarely achieved
- less than half is common.

15. Comment: The practice of killing young seals with clubs remains a subject of international concern and U.S. congressional interest. In my travels to Nunavut and to the Magdalen Islands, the subject of opening the U.S. market to Canadian sealing products, currently prohibited under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, is a constant refrain. The beauty of the Islands and the friendliness of its people notwithstanding, Madelinots can be sure to have another media battle brewing while the controversial killing of young harp seals continues, even if it now involves grey seals, and not the fluffy whitecoats.

KEOGH